

The Rise and Fall of Richard Helms

By Thomas Powers

RICHARD MCGARRAH HELMS BELIEVED IN secrets. Of course, everyone in the American intelligence community believes in secrets in theory, but Helms *really* believed in secrets the way Lyman Kirkpatrick believed in secrets. At one point years ago they were rivals in the Central Intelligence Agency. But they had certain things in common and one of them was a belief in secrets. They did not like covert action operations—subsidizing politicians in Brazil, parachuting into Burma, preparing poisoned handkerchiefs for inconvenient Arab colonels, all that sleight of hand and derring-do of World War II vintage which certain veterans of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) brought into the CIA—because covert action operations had a built-in uncertainty factor. They tended to go wrong, and even when they succeeded they tended to get out. Too many people knew about them. You couldn't keep them secret; not just confidential for the life of the administration, like so many secrets in Washington, but secret, in Lyman Kirkpatrick's phrase, "from inception to eternity."

As Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) from June 1966 until February 1973, Helms was as close to anonymous as a senior government official can be. In political memoirs of the period Helms is often in the index, but when you check the text he is only a walk-on, one of those names in sentences which begin, "Also at the meeting were . . ." If it were not for a little . . . bad luck . . . Helms would be as faintly remembered now as Rear Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter or General Hoyt Vandenberg, two early DCIs.

No one tells stories about Richard Helms. He had allies within the CIA, of course, and friends, and there are men who still admire his professional skill in running a traditional intelligence service, and there are even more who learned to respect his bureaucratic talents. He lost some battles within the CIA but he won all the wars and no one who worked with him ever doubted for long that Helms was a formidable opponent when it came to office politics. But Helms did not win people, as Allen Dulles, Frank Wisner, Bissell, Tracey Barnes and Thomas Karamessines all did. His fires were banked; he kept his own counsel and his distance, and even the men who knew him best find themselves hard pressed when they are asked what Richard Helms was like.

The only genuine anecdote who did not like him, and he came up with it. Before the Helms would read an intelligence overnight. The names of all and the like were replaced Director's convenience there the page providing the true id the Chief of Station (COS) in name for the COS said, "Ray Helms allowed himself to man who told me the story, because the officer in charge of the office had misspelled the name of a man who had once been something of a Helms rival, an important CIA official, Ray Cline, with a C. Helms paused, and said, "Poor Ray. How soon they forget, how soon they forget."

A man has been stepping very lightly indeed, who does not leave deeper tracks than that.

Helms' personal background was atypical of the CIA in two ways. He went to school in Europe (Le Rosey in Switzerland, a posh social institution where Mohammed Riza Pahlavi, later shah of Iran, also went) and he had no money of his own. The practical importance of this fact was that Helms, unlike many early CIA people, needed his job. He could not afford to resign if he got mad and he knew it. In all other respects—race, politics and social background—Helms was typical of the Eastern, old family, old money, WASP patricians who ran the great financial institutions, the Wall Street law firms, the Foreign Service and the CIA.

At Williams College, where he was graduated in 1935, Helms was one of those young men, assured beyond their years, who are voted most popular and most likely to succeed. He was Phi Beta Kappa, which meant he knew how to write papers and take exams with effect, but he had none of the intellectual fire and passion which make teachers value students. Helms' roommate was the son of Hugh Baillie, president of United Press at the time, and after leaving Williams, Helms paid his own way to Europe and went to work for UP in Berlin under Fred Oechsner, a UP journalist who later joined the State Department. In 1937, after a couple of routine years with UP, Helms left Europe and joined the business staff of the Indianapolis Times. In 1942 he

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P. Sulzberger, C. L.
CIA 6.03 Kirkpatrick, Lyman
WISNER, Frank
Bissell, Richard

Penkovsky, Oleg
CIA 1.04 Angleton, James
CIA 4 Cuba: Bay of Pigs
CIA 4.07 Assassination
CIA 1.04 Stewart, Gordon
CIA 1.03 Cline, Ray S.
CIA 4.01 Operation Mongoose
CIA 1.01 McCone, John
ORIG. MAFIA
CIA 1.04 HARVEY, William
Papich, Sam
CIA 1.01 RABORN, William F.
CIA 1.03 CARVER, George

CIA 1.03 WALSH, Paul
CIA 1.03 Duckett, Carl
(long under Sulzberger)